

Feature

One long argument

Evolutionary biologist Ernst Mayr celebrated his 100th birthday this month. **Nigel Williams** reports on his tireless campaign against creationism.

Ernst Mayr, the renowned evolutionary biologist and champion of Darwin, celebrated his 100th birthday earlier this month by leading a scathing attack on creationism. The evolutionary biologist, acclaimed as one of the most prolific researchers, has no intention of retiring and is shortly to publish new research that dismantles the fashionable creationist doctrine of 'intelligent design'.

Although he has reluctantly cut his workload since a serious bout of pneumonia 18 months ago, Mayr has remained an active scientist at Harvard throughout his 90s. He has written five books since his 90th birthday and is researching topics for five papers. One of these, scheduled to appear this year, will examine how 'intelligent design' — the latest way in which creationists have sought to present a divine origin of the world — was thoroughly rebutted by Charles Darwin a century and a half ago.

His work is motivated in part by a sense of exasperation at the re-emergence of creationism in the US, which he compares unfavourably with the widespread acceptance of evolution that he encountered while growing up in 20th-century Germany.

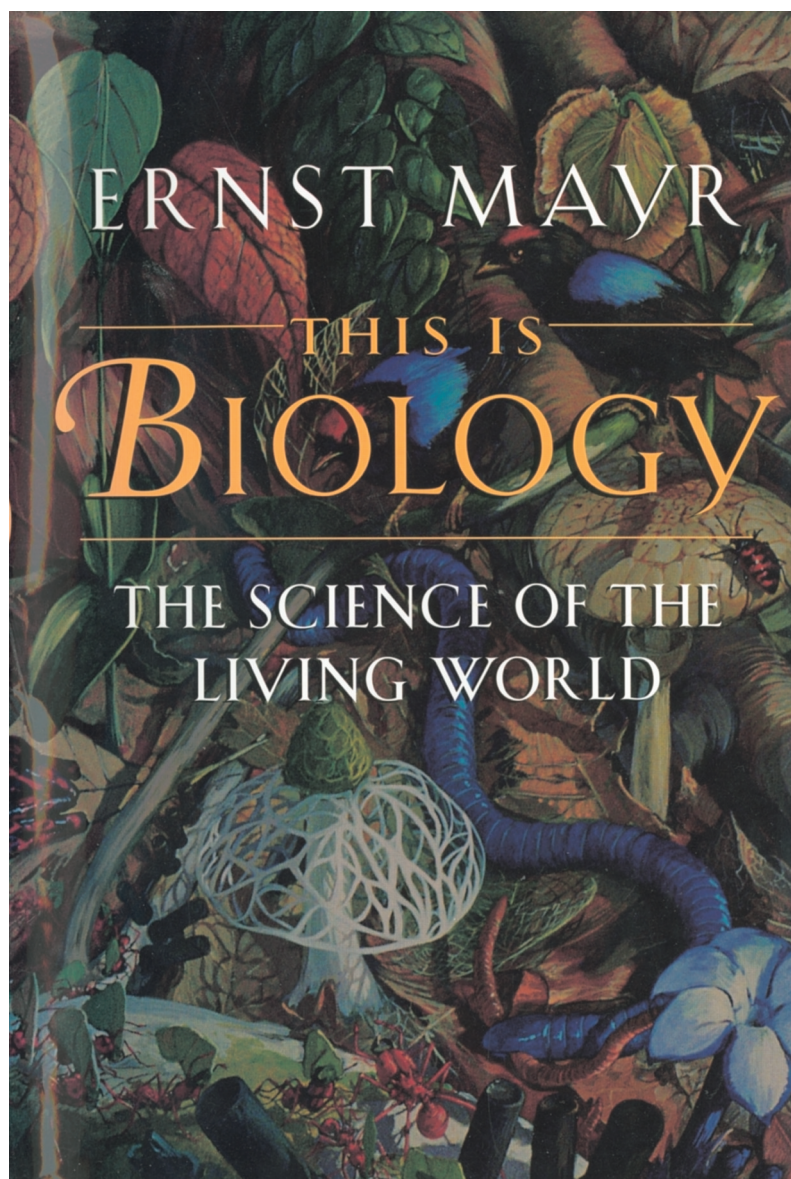
'I received all my education in Germany, where evolution was not really controversial. In the gymnasium, my biology teacher took evolution for granted,' he has written.

The states of Florida, Mississippi, Missouri, Illinois, Kentucky and Oklahoma currently omit the word 'evolution' from their curricula. The Alabama state board of education has voted to include disclaimers in textbooks describing evolution as a theory. In Georgia, the word 'evolution' was banned from the science

curriculum after the state's schools superintendent described it as a 'controversial buzzword'. Fierce protest, including criticism from Jimmy Carter, the former president, reversed this.

Mayr emigrated to the US in 1930. His probably most famous

work, *Systematics and the Origin of Species*, was published in 1942 and is still regarded as a canonical work of biology. But Mayr has also been distinguished by his work on the philosophy of biology and his belief that natural selection makes the subject distinct from many of the issues that are the focus of attention by philosophers pondering the physical sciences.



Writing on: One of the most recent of Mayr's books championing Darwinism was written in his 90s and published by Harvard University Press.